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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study details the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC), one of the local Smart Start partnerships providing child care programs and direct services to children and families in 43 of North Carolina's 100 counties. The DEPC is an interagency partnership designed to model and support the delivery of integrated health, education, and social services to children and their families in two counties in Eastern North Carolina. The case study examines the collaboration process between the counties during the first 3 years of the DEPC and identifies areas for improvement. The case study was developed using data from observations, interviews of staff and Board members, focus groups, surveys, and document review, and is grounded in theory and research on collaborative organizations in education and the social sciences. The study first describes context for the development of the partnership. Collaboration theory is then discussed, and the methodology of the case study is outlined. The history of the partnership is also presented, organized by the steps in the collaboration process. The case study confirms the developmental nature of organizational collaboration, and poses implications for practice and research. (JPB)

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# The Down East Partnership for Children: A Score That Is Collectively Written

**A Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association**

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## The Down East Partnership for Children: A Score That Is Collectively Written

The future of North Carolina's economy depends on the quality of its workforce. Governor Jim Hunt believes that children who come to school healthy and prepared to learn will become better workers – the workers needed to sustain the state's economy in the future. The Governor's Smart Start initiative, funded by state dollars and private donations, was established in 1993 to improve the quality of child care, support preventive health care, make child care more accessible and affordable, and offer education and information to parents. The Smart Start program relies on collaboration and local accountability. Local partnerships bring together community and business leaders, child care providers, parents, educators, and health and human services professionals to develop a local plan to meet the specific needs of the community.

The purpose of this paper is to present a qualitative case study of the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC), one of the local Smart Start partnerships currently providing programs and direct services to children and families in 43 of the North Carolina's 100 counties. The DEPC is an interagency partnership designed to model and support the delivery of integrated health, education, and social services to children and their families in two counties in Eastern North Carolina. The study is grounded in theory and research on collaborative organizations in education and the social sciences. The context for the development of the partnership is described first. Collaboration theory is discussed next, and the methodology is described. The history of the partnership is organized by the steps in the collaboration process. The results of the study confirm the developmental nature of organizational collaboration. Implications for practice and research conclude the discussion.

### The Context

Health and social issues impact a child's education. As the responsibility for these issues has shifted from the federal government toward states and local communities, Smart Start funds have provided incentives and support for community action. This initiative of North Carolina's Governor, James B. Hunt, Jr. aims to assure every child in the state access to affordable, quality education and health care.

Within this context for change, the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) was established in 1993. The DEPC brought together health, education, and social services agencies to address the needs of children and families in two Eastern North Carolina counties. The DEPC mission is to ensure that every child and family in Nash and Edgecombe Counties receive the education, health care, and social services necessary to have a good quality of life and to achieve economic success. The creation of the Partnership has been a collaborative effort which continues to involve concerned and committed citizens from all segments of the two-county community: parents, teachers, school districts, colleges, libraries, social services, health agencies, businesses, local government, and other leaders. They are working to develop and sustain the

collective vision, skills, and resources needed to craft a new service paradigm – "a comprehensive, family-friendly continuum of services."

Although the their first Edgecombe-Nash Smart Start proposal was not funded, the DEPC moved ahead and incorporated in December 1993 without a known source of continuing funding. The first two DEPC employees were hired in January 1994 to begin the Child Resource and Referral Program, and an executive director was hired in July 1994. In September 1996, the DEPC moved out of incubation space provided by the Nash-Rocky Mount Schools into its own facility, the former YWCA building in downtown Rocky Mount. (See Table 1 for a timeline of significant events.) By December 1996, only three years after incorporation, the DEPC had become an organization with a staff of 19 who worked with hundreds of Board and committee members and subcontractors and administered a budget of more than four million state and federal dollars. Change is constant as the DEPC responds to community needs and opportunities. The Executive Director has been involved in the collaborative since the early planning efforts, first as a co-chair of the planning group, next as co-chair of the DEPC Board, and then as the first Executive Director of the Partnership. When asked to describe her role, she responded that she "kept people moving toward the vision" and "directed a score that is collectively written."

**Collaboration Theory**

Some theories of collaboration distinguish between collaboration and cooperation, but Wood and Gray (1991) prefer a more inclusive definition: "Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain" (p. 146).

Organizational collaboration is a unique process depending on the needs and resources of the individual stakeholders in a particular problem domain. Studies of collaborative efforts have found that such organizations progress through predictable stages of development (for example, see Gray, 1985; Hord, 1986; Melaville & Blank, 1993; Reed & Cedja, 1987; Wood & Gray, 1991; and Rigsbee, Reynolds, & Wang, 1995) although "steps" may differ in name and number. Gray (1985) uses the terms "problem-setting," "direction-setting," and "structuring" to describe three stages of collaborative activity.

The early stages of a collaborative effort are particularly important, and Reed and Cedja (1987) describe organizational preconditions which support successful collaboration:

- Linked organizational objectives that foster mutual goal attainment
- Comprehensive preassessment of valued commodities
- Organizational values that promote interdependence
- Environmental scanning and strategic planning
- Administrative commitment, knowledge, and support

Energy invested in meeting these preconditions in the early stages of a collaborative project link to and support activities undertaken later during problem setting, direction setting, and structuring.

In "problem setting," Gray's (1985) first stage of collaborative activity, it is important that stakeholders recognize the complexity of the problem and the interdependence of the organizations that are undertaking the joint effort. During "direction setting," stakeholders work together to gather information and develop a strategic plan. As the plan takes shape, the power must be distributed to allow all stakeholders to influence decisions about the collaborative effort. With implementation, structures and processes are established to accomplish shared goals. An "enablement framework" must assure funding and communication linkages, and as the collaborative evolves, environmental scanning and adaptation must continue (Reed & Cedja, 1987). Throughout the life of a collaborative effort, "boundary-spanners" communicate frequently within and across organizational boundaries and engage in a variety of activities that may support the new organization, protect their own organizations, or link organizations together.

Although the stages of collaboration are incremental, progress often looks more like a spiral than a straight line, and partners must balance a focus on long-term goals with flexibility as they find the most effective way to "knit their local needs, resources, and preferences into a purposeful plan" (Melaville & Blank, 1993, p. 19). Ultimately, the successful implementation of collaborative agreements depends upon stakeholders' collective ability to manage continuous change.

## Methodology

This qualitative case study focused on history of the Down East Partnership for Children, one of the local Smart Start partnerships in North Carolina. It was perceived to be particularly interesting for two reasons:

- The Down East Partnership for Children was a two-county effort from the beginning. As such, it brought together representatives of education, health, social services, and other agencies from both counties.
- The Down East Partnership for Children demonstrated early and continuing success.

The purpose of the study was to examine the collaboration process during the first three years of the DEPC and to identify areas for improvement. It addressed two research questions:

1. How has the Down East Partnership for Children developed as an organization?
2. What have been the results?

The case history was developed using data from the following sources: observations, interviews of staff and Board members, focus groups, surveys, and document review. Major phases in the collaboration process were identified and used to organize historical data. There was evidence of practices associated with successful collaborative efforts, and "gaps" suggested potential problem areas.

There are several limitations of the study.

- Although it is possible to describe evidence of collaborative behavior associated with growth of the partnership, comparative studies will be needed to explore causality.
- The researcher gathered and interpreted data, with reflection and input of the staff. Observer bias is possible, and data are included to allow the reader to draw conclusions.
- The study focused on the early history of the DEPC. Interviews and focus groups involved the staff and members of the Board. The client perspective was reflected in needs assessment data and evaluation reports included in the documents that were reviewed. As the partnership matures and clients can be identified, studies should include the client perspective in more significant ways.

## The History of the Down East Partnership for Children

The Down East Partnership for Children was created to address the needs of children and families in Nash and Edgecombe Counties. This effort has required varied stakeholders in these two eastern North Carolina counties to work together in new ways. Collaboration theory provides a useful framework for examining the history of the Partnership, identifying successes, and anticipating some of the challenges the Partnership and the stakeholders may face in the future.

### Preconditions for Collaboration

It is tempting to begin the story of the Down East Partnership for Children with the date of incorporation, December 1993, but such a history would be seriously incomplete. In fact, the efforts that led to the creation of the DEPC may be the most significant factors in the Partnership's current success. There is evidence that preconditions for successful collaboration were addressed several years before the Partnership was incorporated in 1993 and Smart Start funding was received in September 1994.

**Linked organizational objectives that foster mutual goal attainment.** Statistics suggest serious concerns for the health, education, safety, and security of children in Nash and Edgecombe counties. The indicators monitored by the NC Child Advocacy Institute (see Table 2) show that Edgecombe County ranks among the "lowest" counties in the State in terms of infant mortality, child abuse and neglect, juvenile arrests and violent arrests. While statistics for Nash County are more positive, Nash ranks in the bottom half on six of the 13 indicators.

The two counties have recognized the need to work together to address economic and educational issues for some time. They share the city of Rocky Mount, and the former Rocky Mount City Schools served students from both counties. Economic development efforts in both counties have supported environmental scanning, school improvement, and school merger.

Two earlier initiatives to improve economic and social conditions in the area, Project Uplift and Visions 2000, identified serious child care needs. Early discussions had explored the possibility of a Child Care Resource and Referral Program to serve the two-county area. According to one Board member, "There

were an adequate number of places, but the quality was inadequate." Of 120 child care operations in the two counties, only one was accredited.

In 1993, a third initiative, Common Ground, fostered improved communication and race relations between the two counties.

**Comprehensive preassessment of valued commodities**. The extensive needs assessments from Common Ground, Project Uplift, and Goals 2000 resulted in a broadened recognition that Nash County had some of the same needs as Edgecombe County. "Some began to see that a collective or regional effort could accomplish more." In fact, Edgecombe County's more serious needs became an "advantage" in a funding process based on need. In preparation for the request for Smart Start funding, a meeting was held at the Rocky Mount Campus of Edgecombe Community College to "blend the two counties and convince people that there needed to be a collaborative effort." Later, Nash approached Edgecombe and worked out a funding package.

**Organizational values that promote interdependence**. The Partnership's current vision statement was drafted and approved by the DEPC Board in December, 1994. The statement clearly identifies the qualities of life that the various stakeholder groups hold dear, and it articulates a link between the condition of a community's families and children and its economy.

> We believe that when children are given the opportunities to reach their full potential, they will become loving, nurturing, independent individuals who will contribute to their families, communities, and society.
>
> We believe that all children, when surrounded by their community, can achieve economic success and experience the highest quality of life. Down East Partnership for Children -- Creating a loving, caring, sharing community for children through health, education, economic development, and socialization.

These shared values and their perceived links to social, educational, and economic success were reinforced by the interview results. Board members described the partnership as a significant attempt to involve all players in the lives of these children and improve child care in the two counties. "It's a win-win for everybody. A rising tide brings up all ships." Others recognized the importance of integrating services to families. "Ultimately, there will be easy access to services through one-stop shops spread out over the region, not centralized. There will be less shuffling back and forth among agencies, healthier children coming into schools, and better support systems for children in schools."

Board members noted that "the regional point of view supports economic development." Although the decision to pursue a two-county effort was questioned after the first Smart Start application was not funded, the commitment was reaffirmed and the second two-county proposal, submitted in August, 1994, was funded. The local paper published the following account of the decision to continue the two-county effort:

> Last year Edgecombe and Nash counties joined forces by submitting one application, a move that was criticized after the Twin Counties

were not selected for Smart Start. Statistics show Edgecombe has one of the worst child care problems in the state, whereas Nash County ranked in the middle of the pack. Some in Edgecombe County criticized the collaborated (sic) effort with Nash, saying Nash weakened Edgecombe's chances of getting the grant. Zalkind, though, said the positives of the joint effort outweigh the negatives. The joint application, said Zalkind, is the right thing to do since 'Rocky Mount cuts across both counties.' 'It is much easier to coordinate if everybody from across the county line works together' (Vinh, 1994).

**Environmental scanning and strategic planning**. Not only is the Partnership firmly grounded in comprehensive needs assessment efforts, but both program and organizational development have been driven by strategic planning. Strategic planning efforts prior to the development of the first Smart Start proposal positioned DEPC to respond proactively to not being funded the first year. The Partnership was commended in the Smart Start Performance Audit Final Report for having "achieved 501 (c) 3 status in 1993, well in advance of receiving funding" (p. 57). In the spring of 1994, all stakeholders participated in a strategic planning training session facilitated by the NC Client and Community Development Center. The process helped clarify and reaffirm the organization's focus and prepared the group to develop a second Smart Start proposal and applications for funding from other groups.

**Administrative commitment, knowledge, and support**. From the earliest needs assessment efforts to the current activities of the DEPC, participation in strategic planning and implementation has been broad and connected. As one staff member observed, "The group of interested citizens who got together to apply for Smart Start in 1993 included the heads of all the major service agencies in Nash and Edgecombe Counties." Agencies that operate separately in the two counties, such as Social Services, the Health Department, and the school districts, have their own representative(s) in discussions and on the DEPC Board of Directors. Information is shared openly. At times, it may be difficult to implement new forms of service delivery, but few question the need for improvement.

**Stage One: Problem Setting**

During problem setting, stakeholders come to a deeper understanding of the problem domain. The "problem" for this collaborative effort is summarized in the DEPC mission statement: "To insure that every child and family in Nash and Edgecombe counties receive the education, health, and social services necessary to be economically successful." As the Partnership evolved, stakeholders recognized that the problem in Nash and Edgecombe counties is broader than the child care issues Smart Start is designed to address. As a result, DEPC does not limit its services to children from birth to five years old, but is committed to serving the needs of families with children of all ages. Positive expectations, recognized interdependence, and conveners with legitimate authority are helpful when the problem is being defined.

In the 1994 DEPC Smart Start proposal, the Partnership described the results of their own needs assessment efforts as follows:

> Through our needs assessment we learned that much work is needed to create a comprehensive early childhood system, and then to develop an integrated funding mechanism to allow all children equal access. We learned that the quality of our child care is low, but that child care providers are excited about the opportunity to undergo self-assessment and changes needed to meet high quality, national standards. We learned that the expectations of parents are very different from the expectations of schools regarding what children need to succeed. Our vision addresses the need to increase opportunities for dialogue and sharing between parents, child care providers, and kindergarten teachers. Finally we learned that there are many barriers to services, but the most difficult to overcome may be the attitudes that many people have toward using those services, even those that will lead to a better life for their children. By including prospective program participants in the design of services we expect to begin to overcome these negative attitudes (1994 Smart Start Proposal).

Stakeholder expectations illustrate the shared vision for the partnership. A staff member observed that if the Partnership is successful, there will be one-stop services where families with children of all ages can get all their needs met in one place. One Board member remembered hearing about family resource centers for the first time: "When Rusty shared his vision of family resource centers all over Edgecombe County--I could see it!" Board members and staff described what will happen when the Partnership reaches its goals as follows:

- Lives of families in Nash and Edgecombe will be better.
- No child will be without health care.
- If parents want help, there will be someone to call and classes and materials.
- Children won't face barriers getting into school and every child will be ready.
- More children will be enrolled in higher quality child care.
- More parents will be involved in the education of their children.
- The gaps between rich and poor will be smaller.
- There will be less racism.
- There will be unity between two counties in the services provided.
- You will see that communities and individuals are doing a better job of preserving families, improving education, and increasing economic development.
- Quality of life will be improved.
- Families will be more excited about life in general.
- We will have made people more aware of what's out there.

The interdependence of stakeholder groups is recognized and valued. In the beginning, the Down East Partnership for Children was housed in the Nash-Rocky Mount Teacher Resource Center. The Executive Director observed that

by providing this "incubation space," the school district "parented" the partnership and conferred a sense of legitimacy in the community.

Communication patterns affirm the interdependence among DEPC, community agencies, and stakeholder groups. Frequent contacts were reported by staff members with the service agencies in both counties, parents, the Child Care Association, the Family Home Association, the child care providers, Community Colleges, libraries, the Family Resource Center staff, Community Fellows, and others. According to the Smart Start Performance Auditors, "The Board of Directors at the Down East partnership includes all the right players and there is complete buy-in for the program. The business community is represented and involved, and self-interest is not a factor in the Board meetings. Because so many community service members are on the Board, collaboration is facilitated" (Smart Start Performance Audit Final Report, Appendix, p. 15).

There is also recognition of the need to expand the interdependence. One Board member described the need to develop new Board members. "We've got to start developing new Board members. Task groups are a good way to recruit and develop talent." Staff and Board members commented on the increasing involvement of parents and child care providers. "Seeing our day care owners taking on ownership is exciting. We've gotten the Home Association going. One owner is on our Board. The day care owners have matured and are able to give opinions and have impact. Brainstorming with the Day Care Committee is fun." Others noted that meetings are well attended: "Forty or fifty people got involved in the wage study."

Conveners exert influence and intervene in the problem domain, and their actions may be responsive or proactive. In the DEPC, the role of the convener appears to have been shared. A number of key players possess legitimate authority to act on the problem domain. Until the decision to hire an executive director, the leadership of the Partnership was in the hands of co-chairs. "The composition of the Board includes strong leaders who work well together and have business experience. The Executive Director and Chair of the Board are also highly respected" (Smart Start Performance Audit Final Report, Appendix, p. 15).

When the decision was made to hire professional management, the Board was able to secure a manager, facilitator, and fund-raiser in one person. A Board member described her role this way: "Her background and her enthusiasm have been important. She has provided excellent leadership. She is talented, brilliant, and able to marshal forces."

**Stage Two: Planning and Direction Setting**

Once the stakeholders worked together to define the problem, they must decide how the problem will be addressed. To insure that every child and family in Nash and Edgecombe counties receive the education, health, and social services necessary to be economically successful, the Down East Partnership for Children adopted four goals and organized partnership activities accordingly.

1. **Universal access to high quality early childhood education.**

The Child Care Resource and Referral program provides information to

parents about the costs, availability, and quality of child care in centers and family homes. It seeks to improve the quality of child care through training and technical assistance for child care providers.

2. **Improved parenting and parent involvement in education.** The Family Resource Program is developing a network of family resource centers in Nash and Edgecombe Counties and seeks to improve links between those who need health and human services and the agencies and individuals who provide them.

3. **Eliminate barriers to services.** The Family Resource Data Base provides information and referral for parents who have concerns about their child's growth and development, and standing work groups address the needs for service integration and transportation.

4. **Improve the transition to public school.** The Partnership has supported Home School Coordinators and parent education in both school systems and is currently a key force in the development of a strategic plan for early childhood education in the two-county area.

Developing strategies involves parents, representatives of community organizations, and the Partnership Board and staff. State auditors described Partnership meetings as "effective forums to exchange ideas and make decisions about what programs will best meet the needs of the partnership's children" (Smart Start Performance Audit Final Report, Appendix, p. 15). There is a commitment to involve clients and community representatives in addition to the "recognized" agency directors and business leaders. State auditors noted that "All groups in the community are involved in the collaboration process" (Report, Appendix, p. 56). A February 1996 funding proposal included the following description of stakeholder involvement: "At present we have thirteen permanent staff, multiple permanent consultants, thirty-three Board members, numerous subcontractors, and more than 200 standing committee members all of whom count themselves as partners in the effort to provide high quality education and coordinated community service in these two counties."

Activities that established the positive preconditions for collaboration are continuing to serve the Partnership well during more advanced steps of the collaborative effort. Needs assessment efforts that predated the creation of the Partnership have continued. The state auditors noted that the Partnership is "very proactive" and able to respond when new priorities are identified. Strategic planning is a continuing process. The following example is from the 1995-96 Smart Start Plan (pp. 14-15):

> We see our plan for an integrated, automated service delivery system unfolding in roughly three large stages over the next five years:
>
> Community Development: facilitate strategic planning and capacity development at the local level to create the family resource centers, the networks between them, and to launch the component Family Support and Early Childhood initiatives.
>
> Systems Development: integrate the systems between Nash and Edgecombe County Departments of Social Services; fund an intensive

planning project to add integration of the systems from Edgecombe-Nash Mental Health and the Health Departments in Nash and Edgecombe Counties. Discuss and decide which other services and programs also could be integrated to create a single-portal-of-entry system for service access and delivery.

Staff Development: retrain current workers, hire new workers, and cross-certify workers to be able to use the integrated computer system and to be ale to travel together to Family Resource Centers and create "one-stop shopping" service delivery.

We need to further publicize the plan developed here and solicit more feedback, criticisms, suggestions for improvement, and new ideas.

The need for continued strategic planning is addressed in the proposal which was funded by the Babcock Foundation: "DEPC needs to look back at the planning it did when it became involved with Smart Start and re-assess it, looking to move on to a new stage...."

**Stage Three: Implementation**

Structuring is considered the most challenging step in the collaborative process, but in many ways, DEPC has been structuring along the way. As new ideas are implemented, stakeholders may "lose" authority or power, and negotiation is critical. For the DEPC, it is important to look back to the preconditions for collaboration to realize the importance of the early discussions about whether and how to create a Child Care Resource and Referral program and to apply for Smart Start funding. The decision to undertake a two-county effort and the reaffirmation of that decision one year later were significant. The broad representation of stakeholders on the Board, on committees, and in the day-to-day activities of the DEPC helps assure sensitivity to the needs and interests of all groups.

For the collaborative to last, it must have organizational structures and procedures, a group of "believers," effective communication linkages, and sufficient funding (Reed & Cedja, 1987). DEPC structures and policies have been established as needed. The early decision to incorporate allowed the DEPC to strengthen its position. Early Board minutes describe the process of establishing policies to support the Child Care Resource and Referral program. As the staff has grown, personnel policies and procedures have been established, and as the budget has increased, contracts management software was developed that is now being used throughout the State.

Structures and processes that support positive change are even more significant. For example, grants have been made "with strings attached" to ensure that the groups receiving funding would have the training and support needed for the program to be successful. When Community Fellows complete a leadership training program, they may apply for grants to support projects they believe will make a difference in their community. A standing Evaluation Committee was created in the spring of 1995 to develop an evaluation process that would help the Partnership maintain its focus and ensure progress toward Partnership goals. Current evaluation activities have focused on two levels--the

Partnership as a whole and the individual activities which comprise the total program. Training and support for the development of measurable, client-focused outcomes will result in more useful evaluation data. A peer review process for DEPC programs and grantees will support self-regulation and Continuous Quality Improvement. Broader evaluation efforts have focused on the organizational development of the Partnership and the collaboration process. Examination of and reflection about the development of this collaborative partnership will support continuous organizational improvement and yield helpful information regarding interagency collaboration in other settings.

There is no shortage of "believers" in the work of the Down East Partnership for Children. The Board and staff shared excitement about the increasing involvement of child care providers in their professional associations and the work of the Partnership. When the staff described qualities of work at DEPC, three themes in their responses were purpose, fulfillment, and faith.

Information is an important commodity in a collaborative setting. In the first DEPC offices in the Teacher Resource Center, space was "tight" and shared communication was natural. In the new building, the private offices were a welcomed luxury, but communication required more thought. E-mail has been useful, but impersonal, and the "maps" of communication patterns have stimulated preliminary discussions of how those patterns can be monitored and improved. Newsletters and mailings provide a means of sharing information with the community, and the quarterly evaluation reports stimulate regular communication about outcomes.

Continuing funding is essential for a collaborative project, but the decision to take action without Smart Start funding has set an important precedent for the Down East Partnership for Children. Although the annual revenue has increased from $1,673,503 in Fiscal Year 95 to more than $4,000,000 in subsequent years, DEPC is not dependent upon a single funding source. As the auditors noted,

> The Down East Partnership is an example of a non-profit business that incorporates several funding streams, including Smart Start. Because of the additional funding, the Partnership has the flexibility to offer services which do not necessarily fit under Smart Start criteria. This enables them to be less dependent on one funding source and to implement programs that will have a long-term impact on the community (Report, Appendix, p. 25).

For example, the Scholarship program is conducted on-site in collaboration with Social Services, but the Partnership has established eligibility criteria that allow parents to wean off the subsidy as their income increases over time. The Down East scholarship program provides assistance to families who have reached an income level that exceeds the DSS eligibility level of $13,000. "Local business support is tremendous, and they have received several outside grants. They also have a keen awareness of costs...."(Report, Appendix, p. 57).

In spite of the increasing annual budget, funding concerns loom. One Board member cautioned, "The Board has to understand the financial picture. We need training in fiscal management. It is important to create new funding

streams and a stable financial environment. We need to get a Foundation started, and we'll have to decide whether to get outside help or to develop leadership from within. If we expect Henrietta Zalkind to do it, it will take most of her time."

Partnership programs are grouped loosely in three areas: Child Care Resource and Referral, Family Resource, and Information and Exchange. Many programs are interrelated, and staff "regroup" to work on projects as needed. Many staff members are able to articulate the relationship between their work and DEPC goals, and most identify links to multiple goals. The broad recognition that specific activities support multiple goals is consistent with the vision of integrated services, but results also suggest a need to monitor and reevaluate the administrative groupings to be sure that they support the day-to-day operations and the long-term goals of the Partnership.

## Results and Implications

Collaboration theory provided a useful lens through which to examine the history of the partnership, recognize preconditions for collaboration, and evaluate progress. Results are summarized in Table 3. Implications for practice and research are discussed below.

### Implications for Practice

The success of the DEPC is affirmed through varied outcome measures. Significant growth is evident in increased funding, staffing, and the number and variety of programs and activities. Additional outcome data are collected through quarterly reports. For example, "contacts" increased from 1415 in the second quarter of Fiscal Year 1996 to 8227 in the third quarter of Fiscal Year 1997.

Qualitative results are also impressive. The "superior" rating in the Smart Start Performance Audit was an exciting milestone, and at least twice, the Partnership has demonstrated a unique ability to turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones:

- When they did not receive initial Smart Start funding, the Board decided to incorporate, seek support for a Child Care Resource and Referral Program, and improve the organization's status with respect to future funding opportunities.
- When the Partnership was notified that the school system would need to "reclaim" its office space, the Board purchased the former YWCA building in downtown Rocky Mount, establishing a model family resource center and gaining increased visibility in the community.

Other evidence of success lies in the way the Partnership operates. Leaders and staff recognize the need for reflection, evaluation, and celebration. There is commitment to capacity building in the organization and the community. For example, there is a belief that if program personnel can learn to define measurable client-focused outcomes, they will be able to gather better evaluation data and make appropriate program improvements. The Quality Enhancement initiative was recognized in the Smart Start Performance Audit Final Report. Before receiving quality grants, day care providers sign a contract and agree to participate in an evaluation process. During this time, child care professionals

learn how to use quality assessment tools so that they can continue to monitor and improve their ratings. After they develop an improvement plan, they may apply for customized improvement grants. DEPC staff provide on-going technical assistance to the staff at the center as they follow the development plan.

The history of the DEPC reveals that preconditions for collaboration received significant attention. Progress through the early stages of problem setting and direction setting was relatively smooth. When staff and Board members were asked to identify the most significant decisions in the history of the partnership, they identified decisions made before the partnership was established (preconditions) or during the early phases:

- commitment to a two-county partnership,
- hiring an executive director--manager, facilitator, and fund-raiser,
- decision to take action without Smart Start funding,
- incubation space in the Nash-Rocky Mount Teacher Resource Center, and
- commitment to families and children of all ages--not just birth to 5.

Structuring has presented more challenges for the DEPC. Organizational structures must be viewed as means to an end, not as the "end" themselves. As staff and budget grow, there is greater need for policies and procedures. However, the Partnership is striving to create new models of service delivery that eliminate some of the bureaucratic barriers associated with traditional service agencies. As DEPC is structured, the Partnership must take care to avoid becoming a "bureaucracy" itself.

Change and resistance to change are also predictable challenges for collaboratives. Although collaborative organizations are continually created and require the ability to deal with continuous change, existing systems tend to resist change. Melaville and Blank (1993) suggest that "collaborating partners must develop a process of change powerful enough to overcome multiple layers of resistance--in attitudes, relationships, and policies--within and across service provider institutions, among consumers, and throughout the community." They also caution against "projectitis" - a tendency to focus on individual projects that help a small number of children and families without moving toward profamily delivery systems.

**Implications for Research**

Additional studies are needed to examine the relationship between collaborative practices and organizational success, to contribute to collaboration theory, and to clarify the skills required for successful collaboration.

The Down East Partnership for Children has progressed through predictable stages of development and faced challenges that are "normal" in collaborative efforts. Attention to the necessary preconditions for successful collaboration was strong. Given the accomplishments of the DEPC during its brief history, it is possible that the early attention to needs assessment, linked organizational objectives and values, and strategic planning have contributed to the success. Comparative case studies will be needed to address causality.

The history of the Down East Partnership and the lessons learned contribute to the body of literature and research on organizational collaboration in school-linked systems of service delivery. In their discussion of a comprehensive theory of collaboration, Wood and Gray (1991) raise issues for further study. Preliminary results suggest that the DEPC is a setting in which two of those issues might be explored:

1. What is the role of the convener(s) of a collaborative project and how does that role change over time? The role of the convener has shifted, both intentionally and unintentionally, in the Down East Partnership for Children. What have been the effects of those shifts? How does the convener's role in the DEPC compare to the convener's role in other collaborations?
2. What are the dynamics of a "layered collaboration?" The DEPC's system of grantsmaking helps build capacity within the community to identify and respond to the needs of children and families. The Partnership currently supports more than 50 different programs which address one or more of the Partnership goals, making the Down East Partnership for Children a "layered collaboration." A study of the dynamics of a layered collaboration could provide useful insights for research and practice.

Finally, schools are being asked to become partners with other service delivery agencies to improve conditions for children and their families. Although the benefits of such collaboration could enhance educational results, educators are not accustomed to collaborative strategies, and the education bureaucracy is firmly entrenched. It is important for educators to join with other service professionals to better understand the collaborative process and its potential. What skills do they need? How can those skills be incorporated into preparation and staff development programs? Do health and human services professionals have similar training needs?

The Down East Partnership for Children is an exciting example of an interagency collaborative designed to address the needs of children and their families. A review of the development of the Partnership confirms the developmental nature of organizational collaboration, and concepts from collaboration theory provide a framework for presenting the history of the DEPC. Incorporated in December 1993, the DEPC has grown from an organization with two employees and no known source of funding to an organization with a staff of 19 who work with hundreds of Board members, standing committee members, and subcontractors and administer millions of state and federal dollars to address community needs. In this case, early activities or "preconditions" appear to be particularly significant and seemed to support efforts during problem setting and direction setting. In spite of significant collaborative activity throughout its early years, however, structuring presented predictable challenges, and both the context and the organization continue to change. To engage diverse stakeholders in "collectively writing the score" for improved quality of life for children and their families is a major accomplishment, but successful collaboration requires skill and involves constant change. It is critical for the

professionals who are "collectively writing the score" to know what to expect, to understand what needs to be done, and to possess the required skills to ensure success.

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**Table 1**

**Significant Events in the History of the DEPC**

| | |
|---|---|
| **1992** | |
| Fall, 1992 | Planning and needs assessment<br>Visions 2000<br>Common Ground<br>Project Uplift<br>Early Childhood Initiative |
| **1993** | |
| September, 1993 | Smart Start proposal was not funded. |
| December, 1993 | DEPC Incorporated - without a known funding source |
| | Applied for and received Child Care Resource and Referral Grant |
| | Applied for and received Smart Start planning dollars |
| **1994** | |
| January, 1994 | Staff hired for Child Care Resource and Referral Program.<br>Child Care Committee was formed and identified 20 strategies.<br>Original Child Care Resource and Referral Line was established |
| April, 1994 | All stakeholders participated in strategic planning. |
| July, 1994 | Full time executive Director was hired. |
| August, 1994 | Applied for a Z. Smith Reynolds grant for family resource centers.<br>Applied for (but did not receive) Family Preservation and Support Grant...the vision of a network of family resource centers began to take shape.<br>Applied for Smart Start funding |
| September, 1994 | Received Smart Start funding and celebrated! |
| | First DEPC Open House |
| **1995** | |
| January to June, 1995 | County Collaboration Training, Covey Training<br>The beginning of the "Quality Team"<br>Hired director for the Family Resource and Information Exchange Program<br>First Family Child Care Association Meeting<br>Began Child Care Scholarship Program<br>Grants to establish data base<br>Began planning for Community Fellows program |
| July, 1995 | Began market rate/proficiency development project |
| Fall, 1995 | Received Family Preservation and Support funding. |
| | Open House (at the National Guard Armory) |

**Table 1**

**Significant Events in the History of the DEPC (Cont.)**

| | |
|---|---|
| **1996** | |
| January to April, 1996 | Received Babcock Foundation funding to support organizational development to (1) bring who we are as an organization into sharper focus and (2) build the organization's capacity to manage and sustain a strategically focused effort. |
| | Received a superior rating in the state performance audit |
| | First evaluation training programs |
| May, 1996 | Purchased the YWCA building |
| October, 1996 | SURDNA evaluation |
| | Opened DEPC playground |
| December, 1996 | Open House/EXPO |
| **1997** | |
| January, 1997 | Opened lending library (1-2-97) |
| | Staff and Board Retreat |
| | CC R&R Accredited |
| | No DSS or DEPC waiting lists for child care assistance |
| | Program review process piloted |

**Table 2**

**Indicators of Health and Well-being of Children in Nash and Edgecombe Counties**

| 1995 Children's Index: Leading Indicators of the Health and well-being of North Carolina's Children | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Indicator** | **Edgecombe** ***(Rank)*** | **Nash** ***(Rank)*** | **State** |
| HEALTH | | | |
| Infant Mortality Rate/1000 | 21.4 (97) | 9.9 (49) | 10.6 |
| % Low Birth Weight | 11.9 (93) | 11.3 (91) | 8.7 |
| % Births to Single Teens | 17.7 (88) | 13.8 (67) | 11.0 |
| EDUCATION | | | |
| SAT Scores | 811 (66) | 833 (57) | 860 |
| Dropout Rates | 3.54 (67) | 3.28 (57) | 3.35 |
| High School Graduation Rate | 61.9 (61) | 65.6 (41) | 64.4 |
| SAFETY | | | |
| Child Abuse/Neglect Rate/1000 | 100.51 (96) | 55.65 (51) | 59.65 |
| Out-of-Home Placement Rate/1000 | 6.70 (93) | 3.55 (57) | 3.74 |
| Juvenile Arrest Rate/1000 | 93.14 (98) | 0.89 (26) | 31.16 |
| Violent Arrest Rate | 4.44 (95) | 0.00 (1) | 2.01 |
| SECURITY | | | |
| Median Family Income | $34,000 (43) | $34,000 (43) | $36,100 |
| % Child Poverty | 28.44 (85) | 17.20 (46) | 20.50 |
| % Children on AFDC | 23.2 (92) | 12.4 (47) | 13.1 |

NOTE: This index is published annually by the NC Child Advocacy Institute.

**Table 3**

**A Model of Organizational Collaboration**

| Stages of Collaboration | Down East Partnership for Children Activities |
|---|---|
| **Establishing the Preconditions**<br><br>Prepare for collaborative activity. | • Extensive needs assessment (Project Uplift, Visions 2000, Common Ground)<br>• Broad involvement of key representatives of agencies and other stakeholder groups in both counties<br>• Increasing consensus regarding the needs of children and families and their link to economic development<br>• Commitment to a two-county effort<br>• Incorporation of DEPC prior to receipt of Smart Start funds<br>• |
| **Problem-setting**<br><br>Recognize complexity of the problem and the interdependence of the organizations. | • Problem grew from the needs of children birth to five to the needs of children of all ages and their families<br>• Articulation of a vision of family resource centers that are a "one-stop shop"<br>• Incubation space in the Nash-Rocky Mount Schools Offices |
| **Direction-setting**<br><br>Gather information and develop a strategic plan | • Adoption of four goals around which Partnership activities have been organized<br>• Broad stakeholder involvement through committee work<br>• Continuing needs assessment, strategic planning, and program evaluation |
| **Structuring**<br><br>Establish structures and processes to accomplish shared goals. | • Policies established as needed (e.g. referral guidelines, personnel policies, etc.)<br>• Increased staff<br>• Increased budget and accountability<br>• Contracts management software developed and used statewide<br>• Standing Evaluation Committee established in 1995<br>• Training for grantees in the development of measurable program outcomes |